

EDUCATION TO
READ AND WRITE

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

Narrowing the literacy gap: Making a case for the importance of early language and literacy development in South Africa

It is a hot afternoon in Masiphumelele and the six year-olds who bounce into their weekly after-school reading session at Masiphumelele library, have already had a long day at school. They greet their volunteer tutors with enthusiasm and affection, eagerly asking which book they will be reading today. Within minutes the room has fallen quiet and earnest concentration reigns as the small learners grapple with sounds and letters, and take part in activities and games to help develop their reading and writing.

Next door, a father and his five year-old sit in a corner of the library enjoying storybooks together, talking about the pictures and discussing what might happen next. In a crèche a little further down

the road, a carer leads a room full of three and four year-olds in singing nursery rhymes and action songs. Meanwhile, as two mothers walk down the road outside with their one and two year-olds, they chatter to their children, pointing out and naming objects of interest and encouraging their small charges to try out the words. They pass a small house where a woman sits with her small grandson on her knee telling him a story from her past.

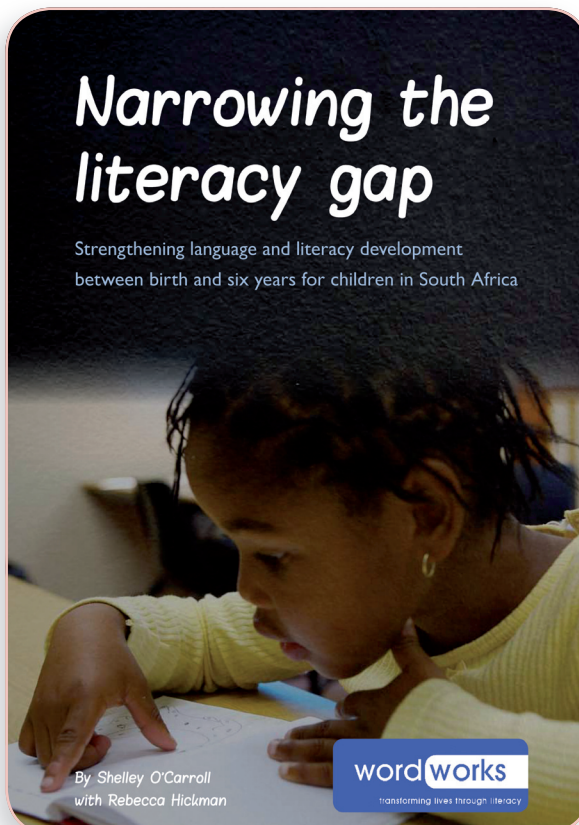
Literacy starts with language

It is not usual in South Africa to think of these seemingly unrelated events as being on an educational continuum. But they are. Literacy starts with language – and language skills are acquired from the day a child is born, through activities and routines at home, in preschools and community spaces, with parents, caregivers and teachers. Early opportunities to use language and enjoy books enable children to develop a wide vocabulary, good comprehension and the ability to express themselves clearly, all building blocks for later literacy success.

South Africa's unacceptably poor literacy rates are unlikely to improve until more is done to address the fact that children in disadvantaged communities often lack precisely these opportunities and experiences.

Literacy (the process of learning to read and write) is too often treated as something that starts in Grade One – while the evidence suggests quite the opposite. A growing body of research indicates that those children who have lacked opportunities to build a strong language foundation between birth and six years will struggle to keep up with

Learning Brief 17





their peers when formal literacy teaching begins in Grade One. Furthermore, in South Africa children living in poverty frequently face the obstacle of having to learn English as a second language when they start school. This combination of challenges tends to reinforce the invidious intergenerational cycle of poverty, low educational achievement and inferior life chances.

Simple Activities can make a difference

Simple activities in homes and preschools can make a massive difference to a child's early language development. For instance, engaging children in talk about past and future events from an early age helps them to develop oral narrative skills, as does social pretend play. Interactive storybook reading encourages infants to develop a love of books and provides an important platform for extended conversations, as well as exposing them to new words and grammar. Certain games and activities (such as 'I spy...' and singing nursery rhymes) enable children to identify the separate sounds that comprise words. These methods do not require particular expertise and can be used by grandparents, older siblings, community workers and many others.

In one of the first studies of language development in family homes, researchers in America recorded interactions with children between 9 and 36 months of age and found large variations in the

amount of speech directed at them. The researchers estimated that by the time they were three years old, children of professional parents had heard 48 million words addressed to them, while children in families receiving welfare benefits had heard 13 million words. Significantly, the amount of talk children heard correlated with differences in their vocabulary, with children who had heard more words achieving higher scores on vocabulary tests at age three and better vocabulary and reading comprehension results at age nine.

Implications for Policy and Practice

What are the implications of this in terms of policy and practice? First and foremost, until language and literacy development are placed at the heart of early childhood development (ECD), later interventions to support reading and writing skills will meet with only limited success among children who have missed out on essential language development in their formative years.

The ECD sector in South Africa has been dominated by issues such as access, teacher qualifications, safety and quality of infrastructure, nutrition and HIV. These very real issues have meant that a targeted focus on language and literacy in the early years has not been treated as a priority. As a result, many preschools suffer from a lack of appropriate teaching resources and sometimes under-qualified, underpaid staff who are not encouraged to value their role in laying the foundations for literacy. This problem is compounded by the fact that language and emergent literacy are a very small component of training for preschool teachers. In addition, training of preschool teachers tends to focus on theories of child development with few opportunities for practical application of the theoretical models.

Improving the quality of preschools must be a national priority.

It is important but not sufficient to widen access to ECD provision – the quality of the facilities, resources and teaching matter too. Going forward, provision of appropriate teacher training and practical learning resources are likely to be key determinants of the impact and effectiveness of preschool education on offer in South Africa and





hence of literacy outcomes for our children.

A literacy strategy from birth to six years should be implemented within the context of broader developmental needs

A literacy strategy from birth to six years must also be placed in the context of addressing young children's broader developmental needs, including healthcare, nutrition and social and emotional wellbeing. There are many possibilities for creative partnerships that target more than one developmental area for vulnerable children. For example, waiting rooms in clinics and hospitals have the potential to become open-access learning spaces where trained community workers can demonstrate shared book reading and storytelling. Such interventions not only strengthen language development but also nurture positive parent-child relationships, enhancing the social skills and emotional health of both adult and child.

Homes should be language environments

In many communities, parents have been inclined to minimise their role by assuming that preschool and school are the proper places for learning. Held back by their view of their role ("education is the responsibility of teachers not parents"), their assumptions about their efficacy ("I don't know enough to be able to help my child"), and limited opportunities to gain relevant knowledge and skills, parents from disadvantaged backgrounds often feel that they are not 'qualified' to support their child's learning.

Yet our vision should be of all homes providing rich language environments where parents and caregivers read to children, tell stories, sing songs, talk about letters and sounds, and take their children to the library. To achieve this, more targeted initiatives specifically aimed at empowering parents and caregivers to support early language development are needed. All parents should have access to programmes which equip them with the practical knowledge and techniques to support their children's language acquisition and celebrate the role of parents as first teachers. To maximise impact, these initiatives should be embedded in the communities that they seek to serve and delivered in partnership with preschools and primary schools.



Community life should support language acquisition

Communities also have a crucial role to play through locally delivered services and projects. Outreach workers and community volunteers all work alongside children during a crucial developmental period, and need to have better access to knowledge and resources about early language and literacy development. By actively building community capacity in this way, practices that support children's language acquisition can be mainstreamed throughout community life.

Investing in research projects and campaigns for early language and literacy development is a good investment

Internationally there is a growing awareness of





the need to invest in research, programmes and campaigns with a specific focus on early language and literacy development. South Africa must catch up. There is extensive evidence and understanding of how language and literacy skills are developed from birth. We now need the strategies, resources and determination to use this knowledge to do things differently, in order to permanently alter the life chances of children from disadvantaged communities. This will require a committed and collaborative effort between educational planners and practitioners, supported by all those connected with the ECD sector. The many examples of best practice that exist at programmatic level in South Africa must become the norm rather than the exception. Only in this way can we ensure that all our children have the educational opportunities that they deserve and equal chances to realise their full potential.

This article presents some of the findings of 'Narrowing the Literacy Gap', a recently published report co-authored by Dr Shelley O'Carroll and Rebecca Hickman and supported by the DG Murray Trust. Dr Shelley O'Carroll is the Director of Wordworks, established in 2005, which runs programmes to support and improve the literacy and language development of children from disadvantaged communities.

This learning brief tells of the hands-on experience of:



Physical address:

8 Capri Road, St James, 7945

Tel: +27 21 788 9233

Email: info@wordworks.org.za

Web: www.wordworks.org.za